

Fear of Professional Backlash May Keep Women from Speaking Up at Academic Conferences

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Academic conferences provide invaluable opportunities for researchers to present their work and receive feedback from attendees during question-and-answer sessions. Women are less likely to ask questions during these sessions, however, and [research in *Psychological Science*](#) suggests that this may be due to anxiety about how colleagues will receive their comments.

Addressing these concerns could help women academics contribute more proportionally to the scientific process, said lead author Shoshana N. Jarvis (University of California, Berkeley), who conducted the research with Charles R. Ebersole (American Institutes for Research), Christine Q. Nguyen, Minwan Zhu, and Laura J. Kray (University of California, Berkeley).

“More men participate in Q&A sessions compared to what we would expect based on who’s in the audience. When asked, men say they are more comfortable participating, and women are more afraid of experiencing backlash for their participation,” Jarvis said in an interview.

In the first of two studies, Jarvis and colleagues observed recordings of 193 Q&A interactions that

occurred following 32 research talks at a single-track interdisciplinary conference. Approximately 63% of the conference's 375 attendees identified as men and 35% identified as women, according to attendees' conference registrations, survey responses, pronoun listings on personal websites, appearances, and names. The remaining 2% of attendees were excluded from the analysis because they identified as nonbinary or the researchers could not determine their gender.

In line with previous research on how gender influences conference participation, 78% of Q&A interactions were found to be initiated by men stepping up to the microphone, whereas women did so just 22% of the time. Men were also more likely than women to be one of the first four audience members to participate in a Q&A session.

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Gender was not found to significantly influence attendees' behavior when they did ask questions, however. Research assistants who were unaware of what Jarvis and colleagues were studying rated men and women attendees as equally likely to challenge other researchers by questioning their expertise or the quality of their work. Men and women were also rated as equally likely to perform polite behaviors such as thanking a speaker for sharing their research or complimenting their work. Additionally, attendees were 24% more likely to be rated as polite when the speaker they were addressing was a woman, regardless of their own gender.

“When people are in power, they use that power to display dominant behaviors and disproportionately occupy space,” as has historically been the case with men in academia, Jarvis and colleagues wrote. “Men’s dominance in Q&A sessions seems to be driven by their greater willingness to jump into the discussion rather than in how they communicate while at the microphone.”

In the second study, Jarvis and colleagues surveyed researchers by email 6 months after they attended a psychology conference in the United States. The surveys were completed by 234 conference attendees, of whom 69% were women and 28% were men. The remaining 3% of respondents were excluded from

the analysis because they were nonbinary or did not disclose their gender on the survey.

The survey results showed that women respondents reported being less comfortable participating in Q&A sessions and more likely to fear experiencing professional backlash if they did participate. Women and men were equally likely to report holding back questions, but they gave different reasons for doing so: Women were more likely to hold back because of anxiety, but men did so to allow other people time to ask questions.

“While we expected men to ask more questions than women, we were surprised to learn that men report holding back questions to make space for other people. Despite this level of self-awareness, it does not seem to be enough to mitigate the collective gender differences,” Jarvis said.

Future work could extend these findings by exploring how race and other identities may influence conference attendees’ willingness to participate in Q&A sessions, as well as what changes could help mitigate gender differences in participation, Jarvis and colleagues concluded.

“By understanding the psychological barriers impacting women’s participation in Q&A sessions, we set the stage to begin work toward structural changes that would create a more equitable space for scientific discourse,” the researchers wrote.

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Reference

Jarvis, S. N., Ebersole, C. R., Nguyen, C. Q., Zhu, M., & Kray, L. J. (2022). Stepping up to the mic: Gender gaps in participation in live question-and-answer sessions at academic conferences. *Psychological Science*, 33(11), 1882–1893. <https://doi.org/10.1177/09567976221094036>